

ARNEST

Dauphin Drive, Diamond Drive, & 33rd Street

Fairmount Park

Philadelphia

Philadelphia County

Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-6212

HABS
PA
51-PHILA,
693-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL & DESCRIPTIVE DATA
PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior
P.O. Box 37127
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Location: A lot bounded by Dauphin Drive on the north, Diamond Drive on the south, 33rd Street on the east and Reservoir Drive on the west, Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: Apparently erected around 1810 as a Philadelphia businessman's rural retreat, Arnest is one of the later and more modest villas purchased by the City of Philadelphia during the mid-nineteenth-century formation of Fairmount Park. The City's acquisition of this and other villa properties effectively extended the benefits of a private Arcadian pleasure ground to the public at large. Since then, the house and its immediate surroundings have come to represent one of the most legible surviving fragments of a villa group that developed along Edgeley Point Lane.

Description: Standing approximately 150' west of 33rd Street, Arnest is a two-and-a-half-story house built of stucco-faced rubble on a central-hall plan. A slate, gable roof covers the building and is pierced by three round-headed dormers: two on the northwest (front) side and one on the southeast (rear) side. Both ends of the roof terminate in a chimney, and a third, off-center, chimney is located next to the southeast dormer. One-story octagonal pavilions flank the facade, joining the main structure at its northern and western corners. Unlike the central section, the pavilions consist of brick, but a layer of stucco masks this contrast. Excluding the pavilions, the building is three bays wide and two bays deep. Although almost nothing remains of the original sashes, photographs indicate that the six-over-six type predominated; Federal-Style variations included fanlights and sidelights on the first story, quarter-circle windows in the northeast gable and ornamental muntins in the dormers. One-story porches, now in ruins, span the northeast and northwest sides of the building. The largest twentieth-century addition is a garage that joins the kitchen at the south corner. Fire and water damage have left the interior in an advanced state of decay, but delicate Federal-Style moldings still adorn the window frames, door frames and staircase. A double row of trees running northeast to southwest passes about 150' from Arnest and serves to mark the course of the long-abandoned Edgley Point Lane.

History: In 1797 Peter Price, formerly a tenant farmer, acquired roughly seven acres of land in the Northern Liberties and erected a one-story wooden house there. While Price could have used this structure as the starting point for Arnest, the latter was probably commissioned in toto by Patrick Byrne who bought Price's property, in trust since 1800, at an 1809 sheriff's sale (Strassner, p.4-6). As a successful Philadelphia bookseller and stationer, Byrne was in a better position than Price to build a

stone house with high-quality woodwork. Byrne or other members of his family appear to have added the kitchen and pavilions between 1809 and 1830. The porches and exterior stucco may date from the same period.

Like other urbanites who built houses off Edgeley Point Lane starting in the mid-eighteenth century, Byrne seems to have intended his residence to serve as an Arcadian retreat. He lived to enjoy his villa for only five years, though it remained in the hands of his heirs until 1856. Robert Pollock acquired Arnest at that time and retained it until his death in 1867. One year later, James D. Arnest became the property's last private owner. In 1869 the City of Philadelphia bought his estate for inclusion in Fairmount Park, and Park employees occupied the house until the early 1970s. During the ensuing period of vacancy Arnest deteriorated rapidly and received almost no attention from the City after the failure of a 1976 restoration plan.

Sources:

Arnest Files, Fairmount Park Commission, Office of the Park Historian, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Box A-957, Philadelphia City Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Strassner, Andrea C. "Arnest Mansion, East Fairmount Park," a report prepared for University of Pennsylvania Professor Roger W. Moss, 1994; includes substantial bibliography and the following appendices: National Register nomination (also by Strassner), annotated chain of title, Patrick Byrne's will and inventory, Ellen Byrne's (Patrick's daughter') inventory and an 1830 fire insurance survey.

Historian: Aaron Wunsch, HABS Summer Historian, 1995.